

**UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL  
CENTER FOR LOWELL HISTORY  
ORAL HISTORY COLLECTION**

**MOGAN CULTURAL CENTER  
LOWELL NATIONAL HISTORICAL PARK  
UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS LOWELL  
KHMER ORAL HISTORY PROJECT II**

**INFORMANTV: CHUONG TRAN [VIETNAM]  
GUESTV: THOL VORK  
INTERVIEWER: MEHMED ALI  
DATE: APRIL 3, 2006**

**A = ALI  
TV = THOL  
T = TRANSLATOR SPEAKING FOR CHUONG  
TR = TRANSLATOR SPEAKING FOR HIMSELF  
C = CHUONG**

**Tape 06.04**

**Note: “T” will be used to denote Translator’s voice, translating the questions asked of and the responses from the informant.**

**“TR” will be used to when the translator is speaking for himself.**

A: . . . Chuong Tran, at the Charter School. And it’s April 3, 2006. And today we’re also joined by (--)

TV: Thol Vork.

A: I’m sorry. Say it again loud.

TV: Thol Vork.

A: Thol Vork? (TV: Yes) Could you spell that?

TV: T-H-O-L-V-O-R-K.

A: T-H-O-L

TV: T-H-O-L

A: and V-O-R-K

TV: V-, yes, V-O-R-K.

A: Okay. Great. Thank you. Thank you for joining us today. First I'm going to ask a little bit of background information about you and your family. Okay? So first, where and when were you born? [Chuong and translator are speaking to each other in Khmer] So you were born in?

T: Born in [Khanh Sung]. [Khanh Hung]. [Long Pol, Soc Trang, Sasang].

A: Okay. In Vietnam?

T: Yah, in Vietnam at Khmer Krom.

A: Okay. And you were born on February 16, 1950.

T: Yah.

A: Okay. And what did your parents do for work?

T: Father was like attorney. (A: Okay) He was one of the judge. It's not fully judge like operated here, but was a judge at that time. (A: Okay) And Mom just stayed home.

A: And in Saigon, or in?

T: Soc Trang. Soc Trang.

A: Okay, excellent.

T: Soc Trang, Saigon.

A: And what were your parents' names? So the father's name is Sam Tran?

T: Yah, yah.

A: And the mother's name is Chinh Thi.

T: Chinh.

A: Chin? C-H-I?

T: C-H-I-N-H.

A: N? (T: H) H? (T: Yah, H) Oh H. C-H-I-N-H. Okay. And how about your grandparents' names? Did you know your grandparents?

T: He doesn't know.

A: So you don't know either mother's parents, or father's parents?

T: He doesn't [unclear].

A: And where was your mother and father born?

T: Born at the same place, the same town.

A: Same town as you? Okay, great. How many members were in your family?

T: Three member of the family. He's the youngest. The first older sister and brother who were third rank general, and they were both killed during the (--)

A: What were their names?

T: Tran Chien.

A: Tran Chien, that's your brother? (T: My brother) Okay, and he was the general.

T: Third star.

A: Third, three star general? Okay. Wow. And how about your sister's name?

T: Tran Thi Mit

A: So Tran Thi, T-H-I, Mit, M-I-T.

T: Yah, Mit.

A: Okay, great. What was your first job?

T: After school he become a monk. (A: Oh!) And after a monk then become a soldier.

A: Okay. Okay. So what caused you to join the military?

T: They joined the army to fight against the freedom of Cambodia against Vietnam. That's the main purpose why he joined.

A: Against South Vietnam?

T: South Vietnam.

TR: South Vietnam.

A: Okay. And at that time what was causing the political situation for you to fight against them?

T: During that time the American was there, American, they were recruiting who, anyone who like reached their [eighteen and up] want to join the army. So, because of political as well as economic [thrive]. So he joined that army.

A: Okay. So you joined the American led army?

T: American led army, yes.

A: But at that time (--) So I don't understand, you were fighting against who? The Viet Kong?

T: Yah. So, yes, South Vietnam, and then Cambodia and Laos later in 1970.

A: Okay. So when you first joined the military you were part of what, what army? The South Vietnamese army?

T: Airborne Americans.

A: So you were part of the American army.

T: Yah.

A: And where did you go for training?

T: There's a place called [Lang Son].

A: Could you write that down for us?

T: At Cambodia too [Lang Son].

A: All right. Great. And you were trained by Americans? (T: Um) Okay. And when you were finished training where did you go?

T: When, after the training they're sent to this camp. They sent all the whole troop to [Bien Hoa]. (A: [Bien Hoa]) [Bien Hoa] and all this, the lead of director, lead of commander, all-American space facility.

A: Okay. And what was your duty there?

T: He was a young soldier under the group call [C2]

A: [C2], okay. And what was your day to day operations?

T: After the training they were in the process of going to the war. So they prepared us how to do the combat, to the front line.

A: Okay. And what, which area in Vietnam were you working in [Kon Tum Krom] or?

T: [Kon Tum Krom]. In 1968 there's a place called [Lieu Moc, Lieu Hi]. There's a place, the group. There's a section called Section 1, Section 2, Section 3. (A: Okay) And along the borderline, borderline of the (--) So on the border of the [unclear] and Cambodian borderline [unclear].

A: So on the border of the southern part of Vietnam and [Kon Tum]. Okay, great. And tell us about some stories from this time.

T: The most [motivated] and the kind of hurtful that he joined the army would be that when he first started there's a group of Vietnam soldiers invite group villagers go to certain place, each of them ask them to carry certain things, like wheat, or seed, or, you know the grass of the rice after they take out that, when it dried? (A: Yup) So ask them to bring that to the one place, and then everybody said, "We're going to have a meeting." And then told them to bring it in. And then, then they come out and lock the door, and let them sit in the room. Lock the door and then they put the gas and burn all those Cambodians. That's what hurt him most and what, that's his memory. So, and that's why he go to the war, because of that. To protect those innocent Cambodians who have been victimized by Vietnam, or by Vietnamese who have been, did that to him.

A: Now this was Viet Kong?

T: That's during the French Revolution.

Tr: The French, I think in early 1960.

T: Viet Minh.

A: Viet Minh. Okay.

T: Viet Minh and Viet Kong.

A: And this is before you went into the military?

T: Before he went [unclear].

A: And this happened when you were a monk?

T: Before, even before he become a monk?

A: Okay. When you went into the army, that was to help you get skills so you can defend the Cambodian people in Vietnam?

T: He also involved in a program called “Special Force.” (A: Okay) [Unclear] set up three people in group, who let’s say, not a spy but can be a spy, who trained to be [unclear] and everything else, with the American. American train them to spy [unclear].

A: And they blend into the regular people?

TR: Yah, blend in.

A: And this village where the people were killed? Where was that? What’s the name?

T: They stay at a Province called [Kien]. Soc Trang, another Province called Soc Trang, Bac Lieu. He said 21 states of Khmer Krom Province.

A: What I wanted to know is the village where these people were killed in the house where they were burned?

T: Roughly about five Province that hit the hardest, and one of them is his village.

A: What was the name of his village? The same?

T: [Kien].

A: Okay. So they killed a lot of Cambodians, not just one village?

T: Afterward, afterward they, those towns, those villages, after they did the ceremony and burning, a lot of (--)

A: To honor the dead?

T: Yah. a lot of, a lot of Cambodians were like trying to fight back. So that create more chaos afterward.

A: So after you were in the Special Forces, tell me about a story while you were a Special Force person.

T: In 1968, the celebration of the New Year, (A: Vietnamese New Year) Vietnamese New Year, (A: TET) um, one day celebrated the New Year, the agreement was that no one will go to war or fight each other. (A: Umhm) Unfortunately during that New Year Vietnamese come to invade. Took to the whole group, the whole entire (--) During that time, and during the New Year when the Vietnamese kind of start, want to take over the part of the Province, most of the, until now the Vietnamese didn’t take over because American kind of defends it, and because of the grenade, or what do you call that, the air,

the air (A: Air coverage) air coverage, air missile, that kind of took that war, or whatever, fighting, killed a lot of Vietnamese during that time. ( A: Right) And so that's in the New Year of 1968.

A: Okay. What happened when the war was coming to a close? What happened to you?

T: He was in prison.

A: By the North Vietnamese?

T: He was in prison from '75 to '79.

A: Okay.

T: During this time he lived like in a cave. During that time they would cuff you and walk you to the working field.

A: They would handcuff you.

T: Handcuff you, working field, and they're surrounding, surround you would be the soldier watch over how you doing. And they give you like a pot of rice a day, but water rice [unclear], with all vegetables whatever to be, [keep us alive]. And at night they would bring you back to the cell, to the place. They put you in a dark cell. Once a week they let you take a shower. And they were spraying with this kind of chemical to put on your skin, like itchy skin, so you got rash, and during at night. Usually they throw this kind of um, there's a chemical, the white chemical, I don't know what they call.

A: White chemical?

T: Yah, was put on your body, just throw on your body, and usually it burned your skin, and the rash on your face, and whatever it touch, just, so that you die, they put that in, and just throw it out. So that's what they're doing in the cell, when they come back to the cell after the work.

A: So torture really.

T: Yah. In the cell of course they're no AC, or there's no, the heat. When you pour that into your skin, when your skin is, because it's hot, (A: Yah) when you're hot, you're sweating, that can be more effective. [Unclear].

A: Before the North Vietnamese took over your area, were you fighting with Americans right at the end?

T: What happened was that American pulled out the troop in 1975. That's how the Vietnamese took over. That's how he got arrested.

A: And where were you when you got arrested?

T: He was (--) Before the Vietnamese come in he got into , he was in the hospital. (A: Oh) He got shot in the leg.

**Side A ends**  
**Side B begins**

A: Okay.

T: He was, stepped on the mine.

A: Stepped on the mine.

T: Yah, he was in a car.

A: Oh, in a car. Where were you driving?

T: He went to a Province called [Unclear] Pailin, where the border, where the Province, one of the Province in Cambodia.

A: You can write that name down? Pailin, like the Pailin, P – A – I – L – I – N?

T: Yah, yah, yah.

A: In Cambodia, or in Vietnam?

T: Cambodia.

A: So you actually went into Cambodia?

T: After the U.S. troops pull out, his group come into Cambodia, fight against Laos, against Laos. After South Vietnam then come to Laos.

A: So you went to Laos? How did you get to Laos? From [Soc Mai]? And when you went, you went to go fight the Laos Communists?

T: Vietnam tried to take over this part of region. So Cambodia tried to defend Laos as well. Not fight against Laos, but to defend Laos against Vietnam.

A: Okay, against the Cambodian. (Tr: Yah, against Vietnam) Okay, this is before Laos fell.

T: The goal is to oversee that part of the region, Cambodian Laos. So Vietnam can oversee Indochina. (A: Okay) So that's (--)



A: To prevent the Vietnamese from taking over, all over Indochina.

Tr: Indochina, yah.

A: Okay. How many years total were you in the military?

T: From '68 to '75.

A: Okay, wow. So you got out of prison in 1979, what did you do then?

T: After, after the war over in 1979 he went to Cambodia, and at refugee camp, and then come to the United States.

A: I'm sorry, did you say, where were you arrested when the North Vietnamese took over?

T: In Saigon Hospital.

A: In the, okay, that's where the hospital was. During the time you were in the military did you fight Khmer Kahong? So you fought both Vietnamese and Cambodian people?

T: Khmer Kahong and Vietnam is technically the same. North Vietnam technically the same. Technically the founder of, teacher of Khmer Kahong is Vietnam.

A: Okay, so you did fight both sets of people?

T: Yup.

A: Okay. So they let you out of prison in 1979? Did you have family still?

T: When he got out, his brother, the older one, he was killed during that time. During this they torture people throwing those things. And also his father also pass away. And when he got out, just [his mom].

A: How about his sister?

T: And his sister is still alive.

A: Okay. So did you meet them and then go to Cambodia?

T: During that time of course celebration that they took over Cambodia, of all the prisoners are suppose to be on probation for three years, but they all were enjoying it. They didn't really pay attention to all the prisoners. That's why, how he left. That he leave because they didn't really pay attention to all of the prisoners.

A: Okay. So this is (--) He was a prisoner in Vietnam? (TR: Umhm) And during New Years 1979, that was the time period that he was able to escape? (TR: Yup) And where was his mother and sister at that time?

T: Stay at the same village they have been.

A: So did you go see them, or you went straight to Cambodia?

T: He just went to see them, then they come to Cambodia.

A: And all of you, all of the people went to Cambodia, all of his family?

T: Just him, only him.

A: Okay. Okay. And so when you went to Cambodia, what year was it?

T: 1979. After the New Year of 1979.

A: And by this time Vietnam had already invaded Cambodia?

T: Yah, they already took over Cambodia.

A: And was it easy to travel through the country?

T: During that time not too restricted, but it's the policy that nobody leaves.

A: And the reason you went to Cambodia, were you going straight to Thailand?

T: Stay there, work for awhile to get some money.

A: And what did you do for work?

T: Fisherman. Fisherman and [unclear].

A: Okay. Okay. And did you see the devastation caused by the Khmer Rouge when you first went there?

T: By the time you become a fisherman, there's all of the property, like houses around, [unclear] just a farmer, or just not really anything much. So we [a lot destroyed], but there's no Khmer Rouge.

A: Okay. And how long did you stay before you went to Thailand?

T: A year, a year and a half.

A: Okay. And when you went, how did you get to the camp?

T: There's a leader of the group say, "Hey you want to go to Thailand?" They had a leader, "Take me Thailand," but they pay them in gold. So that's why he worked there to get some gold [unclear].

A: So how did you feel when you finally got to the camp?

T: The gold he left from [Khmer] Trang is to [avoid you in] Vietnam. And when he come to Cambodia, South Vietnam again. So, and then he went into a refugee camp. He thought he just escaped Vietnam, but not really. So they form a group, they build a group of soldier, and they fight against Vietnam again. So he was a soldier in Vietnam, in a refugee camp. It's about two years a soldier in a refugee camp, about two years there.

A: Okay. In the refugee camp they formed a group?

T: Yes.

A: And did they have weapons?

T: There's a, they have weapons, even they have a lot of weapons.

A: In the refugee camp?

T: He doesn't know where they got the weapons, but there's weapon (A: In the camp) in the camp.

A: And from the refugee camp, did they go out and fight?

T: Yah, they go all the way back to Cambodia, back to Battambang.

A: Did they use the refugee camp as a base, or they just left the refugee camp and went out to fight?

T: They have the whole set of group. They have general, they have all set up of base in refugee camp. So they have commander, they have leader, plan, and all of that. So every time they want to go war, they had [unclear].

A: So, but did they work out (T: Yah) of the refugee camp (Tr: Yah, they work out) to go out and then come back a month later, or two months later, or two weeks later?

T: So one or two protect the Cambodian in the camp [unclear] fight Vietnam and Cambodia.

A: Only fight (--)

T: So it's to prevent the Viet [unclear] from invading the refugee camp.

A: Who was the leader of this army?

T: They just called Son San, the one who organize it.

A: Son San?

T: Son San.

A: How do you spell that?

T: S - E

A: S - O - N, S - A - N.

T: Yes, Son San. Son San is one of the top commander, top chief operator during the revolution. He most likely, his age is about (--)

A: He lives in France?

T: Yah, he's (--) He was the treasurer of the National Cambodian Bank. Like that guy, the guy from the White House [unclear]. He like that. [Unclear]

A: And was he Khmer Kahong originally?

T: Khmer Krom.

A: Khmer Krom.

T: He wasn't Khmer Krom, but he was (--)

A: Was he Khmer Rouge?

T: No. He was with the Sihanouk. He was with all those, the leader clan, and he's one of the top leader during that time. So when the Cambodian lost the war he organized a refugee camp [lots of background noise] along the border, and help organize it.

A: Which camp did you stay at and work out of?

T: Um, the new camp they call [unclear].

A: How do you say it?

TV: They call 006

A: Say it again?

TV: 006. 007.

TR: 006, 007

A: Oh, 007. Okay.

T: The name they call it [Nu Tmai]

A: [Tmai]

T: [Tmai, yah, Tamaru Tmai] so the new camp. That's what they called the new camp. [Unclear].

A: Okay. Great. So tell us about one of the operations that you did during this time, military operations.

TR: He's like, in the group they have the leader of the group. (A: Yah) [I don't know what's that called] He's the leader of the group. He goes to, all the way to Battambang Province and along the borderline.

A: Okay.

TR: That's his destination that he take over fighting.

A: Did you have any successes?

T: They just attacking at night. They never have a chance to go daytime.

A: And what, what ended that operation after two years?

T: In term of success, at the time difficult to explain, because when they go there's two different group, one [Hang Som Rien] group, also director, oversee Cambodia, but it's also Vietnam. Sometimes there's two political leader there, but [Hang Som Rien] is Vietnam.

A: [Hang Som Rien]?

T: Hang Som Rien, yah, he's the first president after the war, and then [Hung Sang] the second. So when they go and if they see a Vietnam group, they fight Vietnam group. And then they took off, back, and then they go [unclear], it's the [unclear] group they kind of pull them out, didn't really fight with them. So they really had the like, okay, I'm going to take over this part, I win this part. It's not like that.

A: So what made you decide to come to the U.S.?

T: When, during that time there's, they're like Red Cross or other government, American government sponsor went there. In that time he had this, the picture ID that he work with American soldiers before. And then they said, "At least you were an American soldier, you should have the right to come to the United States if you want to." So that's how he decided to come to the United States.

A: And you still have the photo?

T: He still have the photo.

A: And when you were a prisoner they didn't take that away?

T: Yah, he, nobody knows. Nobody knows, he hide that. Nobody knows.

A: Where did he hide it?

T: The picture he gave to his mother during that time. So his mother save that. Now he still have a place that a lot of kind of [pin locked up].

A: Excellent. Where did you first come to when you came to the U.S.?

T: He came first to Massachusetts.

A: To where? Lowell?

T: Lowell. No Boston. Cambridge, Alston.

A: So you lived in Cambridge and Alston first, when you first came?

T: Yah, yah.

A: And what was your experience? What was your ideas about first coming to the U.S.? What was different?

T: The good thing was that really happy, very, very happy, especially about the food and other safety. When he get in the sponsor give him like chicken, fish and all of that. He don't really want to eat it, because he want to save it. Eat some of it, but try to save it. And his sponsor say, "Eat it. If you don't eat it to a certain day they're going to throw it out." So he did that. That's the most experience time.

A: And when did you come to Lowell? What year?

T: 1987.

A: And why did you come to Lowell?

T: He see the [unclear].

A: Okay.

T: They have a lot of Cambodians near to here.

A: And you wanted to be with other Cambodian people?

T: Yes.

A: And where did you go to work when you first came to Lowell?

T: He worked in a plastic company.

A: What was the name of the company?

T: Solo Cup.

A: Oh, Solo Cup.

T: Yah.

A: Okay. Sure. Yah. And where did you, where was your first house in Lowell?  
Where was your first residence?

T: On Union Street.

A: On Union Street?

T: Union Street, yah.

A: Now since you've come to Lowell you've started to get very active politically with Khmer Krom.

T: He's involved indirectly. He provides some financial support for the family [noisy background] overseas in Cambodia. Stuff like that, and build the Temple in Cambodia.

A: Okay.

T: So indirectly, not politically involved.

A: Not politically, okay. What other stories would he like to share with us today?

T: Before, before he dies, before he dies or anything else, he wants to see one thing, is that Khmer Krom become independent. If it's independent of Khmer itself, Khmer Krom itself, or become independent [unclear] itself, it doesn't matter as long as they have the

right to be, claim themselves as a Khmer. They pay their own [tax], they live independently. They set up their own policy and religion, whatever case might be. So become it's own independent. Nobody suppress or pressure, or claim [tax], arrest you because you are Cambodian, or because you were anything, just say that you are, you will be independent. Before he dies that's one thing he would like to see happen to that [reason].

A: How are the Khmer Krom special? How are they individual people?

### **Tape I ends**

### **Tape II, side A begins**

T: The unique and the special of Khmer Krom will be the Temple. Right now it's 620 Temple across 21 states.

A: Wow.

T: If anywhere that the foreigner, or anybody want to observe, you will see there's a Temple that will be identified as a Khmer, Khmer Krom, in that area. So that's special, unique thing, that the religion play a major part, major role in the, [this world].

A: Is there a policy by the Vietnamese to try to like eliminate Khmer language, or Khmer culture?

T: One thing they (-- The Temple (-- One thing they try and [interrogate] of the Temple is that they will build a bridge, or they build a damn where some road where the Temple is. They're not going there to burn it, or they destroy it, but they say, "Okay, we're going to build a road." Of course this mean [unclear]. So that's one way they do it. In 1979 and a little after 1980 or something like that, they still force the [Monk] to become civilians. So they still do that. Right now he doesn't know if they're still doing that, but one way they're still doing it is that they will build a road where the Temple is, or where they place they worship, or something like that.

A: To purposely destroy the Temple.

TR: To purposely kind of eliminate or destroy it.

A: How many Khmer Krom in Lowell do you figure?

T: The exact number he doesn't know, but the mass majority of the like 21 states in this region here is all Khmer related to Khmer Krom. He kind of coordinates all of that activities, kind of create policy, whatever [unclear] for the Khmer Krom. But exactly number, or estimate number, he doesn't know.



A: One very, very important question to ask. How is it that Khmer Krom always wins the race on the Southeast Asian Water Festival?

T: The racing boat is the activity, because of the region of Khmer Krom there's a lot of lakes, and all that, river. So that there's activities [unclear].

A: Any final thoughts?

T: In the meantime the activities of Khmer Krom is to rely largely on the Khom United Front.

A: On the what United Front?

T: Khmer, Khmer Khom United.

A: Okay. That's an organization?

T: K - H - O - M, I think.

A: Okay.

T: Khmer Khom.org I think that website is there.

A: Okay. You have a website?

T: Yah, yah.

TR: Yah. Khmer Khom website. I saw that. So those are political front, the ones who kind of fight with, not fighting, but propose policy to the United Nation to help out Khmer Krom. And he's the kind of coordinator, or director of this region of the political front on those activities.

A: Okay. Well thank you very much today.

**End of Interview**